

Ted Trainer

Why does the US behave like that?

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In the last few years there has been a remarkable increase in the readiness to question and criticise the behaviour of the US. We seem to be rapidly moving away from the idolisation and “All the way...” attitude that prevailed since World War 2. John Menadue documented the US’s record of thuggish behaviour well in his recent Pearls and Irritations article, referring to for instance the 70+ wars it has started since WW2.

But unfortunately most of the commentary gives the impression that the US is just an arrogant bully that likes to throw its weight around and to be seen as top dog ... and as “exceptional”. It is often accused of “adventurism”, as if they behave like that for the fun of it. This does not represent what’s going on. The critics almost always fail to focus on the basic factor driving the syndrome, or on the way we in Oz are complicit. The core issue is the nature of capitalism and the dynamics which now drive imperialism. There is a vast literature on all this but it is largely ignored.

The first empire was established about 5,500 years ago. Since then political history has been a parade of some bunch slaughtering their way to the top and running things in their interests. In recent times the British were among the most disgusting, although the Belgians would also podium. My school atlas boasted a lot of red space, but didn’t point out that it took more than 70 wars of conquest to establish. The German challenge failed but exhausted the British, enabling the US to organise the present empire.

The point of establishing an empire is to loot it. Of course we now use more polite language and, for the most part more polite means. Usually these days there is no need to send a gunboat; just get a country into impossible debt and offer to bail it out if it accepts an IMF Structural Adjustment Package. John Perkins explains how his job was to do this. The conditions reorganise the economy in ways that enable our corporations to come in and do more or less what they want with minimal interference, while ensuring that national resources are devoted to repaying the loan rather than improving the lives of the majority. The best lands end up producing luxury export crops while the poor remain hungry, foreign investors get access to the forests and minerals and set up sweatshops to produce cosmetics via ultra cheap wages, etc. etc.

There is a mountain of literature on how this has not worked ... but it’s wrong. It has worked like a dream ... as a mechanism for siphoning vast wealth from poor countries to the corporations, banks and shoppers in rich countries. Chussudowsky labelled neoliberalism the greatest wealth transfer in history.

A major element in the looting process is the fact that Third World wages producing our imports are in general under one-fifth of those we would demand. Another is that a third of the ecological damage associated with the products we use occurs in the exporting countries. But the most powerful mechanism is simply the never questioned acceptance of the market for determining what happens in this economy. Everybody knows that the free market is the best and right way to decide what is produced and who gets it at what price. Thus it is regarded as the fundamental principle in the “rules based world order” they all believe in so ardently.

The rules, however, ensure that the world’s rich get most of what’s available. Why for instance is about one third of world grain production fed to animals in rich countries, while around 600 million are hungry? Because the rich can pay more for it, that’s why. In addition the market ensures that “development” is of industries that meet the demand of the world’s richer people.

We in Australia could not have anywhere near our affluent “living standards” if these processes were not occurring, delivering to us far more than our fair share of world resources via rotten wages and working conditions.

It is remarkable how the study of orthodox economics causes a dreadful disease ... a kind of blindness. Graduates cannot see that the market is incapable of taking any notice of urgent needs, morality, justice, decency, social cohesion, the welfare of people or of the environment. To enshrine the market is to insist that profit not need should determine what happens in the economy. It is also to accept that the vicious inequality the market produces is legitimate, natural, and to be accepted.

This vast ideological and institutional apparatus has to be kept in place if our economy and our rich world lifestyles are to be maintained. You and I cannot expect to go on getting far more than our fair share of world resources unless the mines and fields and sweat shops continue to produce cheap goods for our supermarkets. Most of the maintenance is carried out automatically by the kind of economic system we have, but from time to time there is a need to take more deliberate action to deal with threats to the system. From time to time poor people object and seek to break away. Sometimes people like Allende or Gaddafi or Lumumba want to run their economies in the interests of their people rather than foreign corporations. Sometimes regimes seeking to do that have to be removed. The US has 800 military bases on foreign soil, spends around \$700 billion every year on arms, allocates some \$60 billion to the CIA, has started more than 70 wars in the last 60 years, tried to assassinate Castro (638 times by one account), sold vast amounts of arms to murderous regimes, propped up many dictators, brought down many regimes ... primarily in order to maintain or extend the empire.

The world is driven by the ceaseless quest to expand investment opportunities. Capital accumulates all the time and therefore there is constant pressure to find additional outlets for its profitable investment. Investment never goes into doing what is most needed. It is always invested in whatever is likely to make most profit. Long ago the Monthly Review school drew attention to this “problem of surplus” built into capitalism. Collins is among those who explain how the increasing difficulty of finding outlets has now reached the stage of catabolism, that is, parasitising wealth previously created. Much of the enormous “financial” industry is about the acquisition of assets that will not add to production of anything useful but which will yield rents.

Hence the intense concern to get into activities and regions that were previously not accessible. When you tip out a Ghadaffi or Allende or install a Suharto or Pinochet you enable great expansion of investment opportunities. Usually being “the leader of the free world” enables the access quietly and politely, via offers of aid and trade deals, etc., but from time to time invasion and regime change paves the way for a lot of good business. Most if not all of those 70+ wars were about making sure we could deal with governments that were prepared to run their economies in ways that suited us.

The major beneficiaries are of course rich world corporations and banks, and the military industrial complex that secures the access. But you and I are also major beneficiaries. We could not go on getting all that Tantalum if global resources were allowed to be devoted to global need.

So think carefully about bucketing US; they are doing the heavy lifting for you.

By the way what about the claim that the US is exceptional? It’s quite true. With respect to inequality, infant mortality, health services, life expectancy, imprisonment, voter registration, treatment of minorities, gender inequality, violence, gun ownership, educational standards, drug dependence, racism, child care, environmental protection, governance, aid per capita, social, militarism and military expenditure, international belligerence, and cohesion and social progress indicators...the US rates at the bottom or within the worst three OECD nations. Long ago the US was stolen by the rich. There is however no class war there. Warren Buffet pointed out that there was, but his class won it.

When will it be realised that this is what capitalism leads to? When will it be realised that there are tight connections between US thuggery, sustainability and our affluence?

If you insist on an economic system in which you allow what is done to be determined by what the few who own most of the capital think will maximise their wealth, then you must expect and endorse increasing effort to expand the empire. If you want affluence then you would be wise to remain heavily armed and continue to support your great and powerful friend.

When will it be realised that the only way out of this is to shift to far simpler lifestyles and systems in a post-capitalist world?